

A Virtual Election in a Fantasy Chechnya

By Svante E. Cornell

The parliamentary elections in Chechnya orchestrated by the Kremlin on Nov. 27 were another step in President Vladimir Putin's strategy to gain international legitimacy for his handling of Chechnya. While this may constitute a short-term victory, the elections do nothing to improve the deadlock in Chechnya and the rapidly deteriorating situation in the North Caucasus as a whole.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, if not earlier, Putin has painstakingly followed a five-step strategy for dealing with Chechnya. The first component was to isolate Chechnya and hinder both Russian and international media from reporting independently on the conflict. The second was to rename the conflict: Instead of a war, it was now an "anti-terrorist operation." Third, Moscow sought to discredit the Chechen struggle and undermine its leadership by accusing the Chechen opposition collectively of involvement with terrorism. Fourth was the "Chechenization" of the conflict: an attempt to turn it into an intra-Chechen confrontation by setting up and arming a brutal and corrupt but ethnically Chechen puppet regime in Grozny under the leadership of Akhmad Kadyrov, the former mufti of the republic. Finally, Moscow declared that the war was over and that a process of normalization was taking place, seeking to legally and politically return Chechnya to the Russian fold and making it an international nonissue.

The first step in normalization was a referendum on laws to elect a Chechen leadership, which was duly held on March 23, 2003. This was followed by an October 2003 presidential election that sought to legitimize the rule of Kadyrov over Chechnya. An unforeseen step was the early presidential election of August 2004, held due to the assassination of Kadyrov in May the same year (which failed to derail Moscow's plan). The parliamentary election held this November sought to finalize the process of normalization.

This process has garnered a modicum of international legitimacy, but it has blatantly failed to stabilize Chechnya. To the contrary, this misguided enterprise has spread the unrest in Chechnya to the rest of the North Caucasus, jeopardizing Moscow's control over the region.

The main problem with Moscow's strategy has been its total disregard for the realities in Chechnya. As a recent report by several Russian and international NGOs titled "A Climate of Fear" aptly suggests, the Kremlin has sought to create a "virtual Chechnya" through propaganda. In this Chechnya, life has normalized and the war is over; the only problem is that this Chechnya does not exist.

The real Chechnya, as documented by innumerable eyewitnesses and Russian as well as international NGOs, is a territory where basic human security does not exist. Federal forces and their subcontractors, the forces of Ramzan Kadyrov, commit atrocities against civilians with impunity while the increasingly radicalized resistance in turn uses indiscriminate violence in and outside Chechnya to increase the cost of the war to Moscow. The extreme brutality of Moscow's campaign and the lawlessness that plagued Chechnya during its periods of de facto independence have led to a process of "Afghanization" at a wider social level. As in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, the human and material destruction and the collapse of civic norms and values have undercut the very functioning of society, creating a fertile breeding ground for radicalism among a young generation that has known nothing but violence and deprivation.

Thus Moscow's political enterprise in Chechnya is at best a poor attempt at window-dressing. All four votes -- the referendum, two presidential and one parliamentary election -- have been farcical. Turnout figures have

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been widely inflated each time, masking the widespread refusal of the population to take part. In the referendum, the legal texts were drafted in Moscow and were not subjected to meaningful discussion or deliberation in Chechnya. No true opposition has been allowed to participate. The separatist opposition has been shut out of the process, making any form of reconciliation or conflict resolution impossible. In addition, many independent forces loyal to Moscow have also been shut out of the process by administrative and coercive measures -- to safeguard the Kadyrov clan's hold on power. In none of the elections was real choice available to the people. Freedom of assembly and freedom of the press have been severely restricted, and no true debate has existed. To cap it all, the armed groups ubiquitous in the republic have made any true political process impossible.

The Nov. 27 election was no different: Its results were widely believed to have been predetermined. Only 2 percent of Chechens interviewed in a pre-election poll thought the popular vote would determine the result of the elections. And indeed, United Russia swept the vote despite much lower ratings in the few opinion polls that were conducted.

Like Moscow's entire plan for the normalization of Chechnya, these elections did nothing to help restore stability and speed up development in the North Caucasus. Instead, their cynical character further alienated the population of Chechnya and neighboring regions. At a time when it is increasingly clear that Moscow fails to control not only Chechnya but the entire North Caucasus, this is a worrisome development.

Even more disturbing is the Western response. In a statement betraying either outright cynicism or total ignorance, a European Union spokesman expressed hope that the elections would lead to peace talks -- whereas Moscow's entire purpose for the elections was to sideline any possibility of peace talks with separatists. Germany's reaction was even more baffling, with Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier characterizing the elections as "progress." Clearly, EU and German officials cared little here about European values. The elections were monitored neither by the OSCE nor by the Council of Europe. The irony is that the absence of election monitoring -- based largely on an assessment that the elections did not even merit the attendance of monitors -- gave European officials a free hand to renege on their own principles.

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan recently invited hundreds of OSCE and Council of Europe observers to their respective elections. The international observation missions, true to form, emphasized that all elections must be held to only one standard, that of the OSCE member states; hence, they did not state whether these elections constituted progress or not. Consequently, failing to meet these standards, the two governments faced strong European criticism that paid little attention to the significant progress both had made in their earnest but incomplete attempts at political reform.

Unlike presidents Ilham Aliyev and Nursultan Nazarbayev, Putin got it right: By staging an election so bad international monitors would not even attend, Russia effectively shielded itself from criticism and provided the opportunity for Western officials eager to appease Moscow to term it progress, instead of holding Russia to the international standards that Europe otherwise claims to hold so dear.

In the long run this will not help Chechnya's, Russia's or Europe's interests.

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